

Deference, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. E1090111
Genesis 1:1-5 and Mark 1:4-11
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The beginning of a new year, 2009, is a good time to consider new beginnings. Our scripture texts this morning speak of two significant beginnings, the beginning of the world and the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

I received an e-mail yesterday from a couple entitled, "The Children's Bible in a Nutshell." (These are the purported recollections of a child's Sunday school lessons, but I suspect they're written by an adult trying to be humorous.) At any rate, here is the restated account of Genesis 1:

"In the beginning, which occurred near the start, there was nothing but God, darkness, and some gas. The Bible says, 'The Lord thy God is one,' but I think He must be a lot older than that. Anyway, God said, 'Give me a light!' and someone did. Then God made the world." Let me assure you that the children and youth of this church receive a far better and more accurate education than that!

The second verse of our Bible says, "The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."¹ The phrase "wind from God" is more accurately translated, "a mighty wind." The Hebrew is literally, "a god-big wind." The point is, in the beginning there was chaos—darkness, and formlessness. The imagination pictures the stormy ocean churned by a mighty wind.

The priestly writers of this part of Genesis were concerned with order. They created the first creation story as a neat package of six days of creation in ordered categories, leaving the seventh day, the Sabbath, as a day of rest from creation and a day for Jews to devote to the worship of God.

The Bible does not state that God created ex-nihilo, out of nothing, but that God created order out of chaos! God gives order. That's good news for us, especially in these times.

Order is a good thing. That's why people carry around calendars, so they can order their activities during the week. That's why we have painted lines on our highways to tell us where to drive our cars. That's why we like symmetry. That's why we have laws. Laws help us to order our living with each other. The beginning of this year 2009 is a good time to look at our lives and see how they are ordered.

The other beginning in our scriptures today is the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Mark gets right down to business. He doesn't tell birth stories or give a list of Jesus' ancestors. His first words are, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."² He immediately begins telling us about John the Baptizer.

John was, well, he was a baptizer. He wasn't "John the Baptist." If he were, you'd be asking, "Was he Southern Baptist or Primitive Baptist?" "Baptist" wasn't a denomination or an adjective. John was an active baptizer, proclaiming that people had to repent: to change their ways. He baptized with water, signifying a clean and changed life. John wasn't afraid to tell the powerful and rich to stop cheating the poor. Remember, the rich and the powerful were in their places because the violent power of Rome had allowed them to be there.

John had disciples. Peter and Andrew were disciples of John before they became disciples of

¹Genesis 1:2

²Mark 1:1

Jesus.³ It is thought that Jesus himself was one of John the Baptizer's disciples. That is probably what occupied him as a young man from age twenty to age thirty. Mark says that it was after John was arrested that Jesus began his ministry.

The story of John and Jesus is the story of deference. John was the older and wiser, yet he said that he wasn't worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of Jesus' sandal. Deference is stepping aside for another. Call it good old fashioned politeness. Deference is opening the door for another. It is giving up your seat for someone else. It is allowing someone to go in front of you in line.

The antonym of deference is disrespect. When we disrespect another, we can write off him or her or that group. We stand in arrogant judgement that they are not worth anything to God. So, we can step in front, push aside, verbally abuse, or even kill. Disrespect is the reason behind the Hamas-Israeli struggle. Disrespect is the reason behind the Bernard Madoff and Rod Blagojevich scandals.

Deference is a choice. When giving up one's seat is mandated by a Jim Crow law, that's not a free gift of deference. It's just one more sign of the powerful oppressing the powerless. Tom Ehrlich wrote,

When deference is chosen, however, it can have noble content. The strong should protect the weak. Youth should respect age. Pregnant women deserve special protection. Children need the watchful eye of neighbors. The proud should help the victim. Those who stand in harm's way on behalf of the community deserve honor. Refusal to show deference is destroying us. In our economy, we're paying a steep price for allowing the strong to prey on the weak. The brewing battle over retirement benefits for Baby Boom elderly will reveal the soul of a nation. Exploiting children as customers, rather than growing their minds and skills, is undermining our society. Particular forms of deference might need to be rethought, but the idea of deference seems more essential than ever. Imagine a Gaza Strip where Palestinians deferred to Israelis' needs for safe homes, and Israelis deferred to Palestinians' need for the same. John the Baptist deferred to Jesus so that Jesus could grow. Later, Jesus applauded a father for deferring to his son and condemned religionists for not deferring to a stranger. He himself stepped aside so that the Spirit could come and his followers blossom."⁴

Can we practice more deference and less aggression or control? This is a time of new beginnings. Baptism began Jesus' ministry. Baptism began our lives as Christians. Baptism begins our ministries. We are, each of us, baptized into ministry. We are called to look at how our lives are ordered. Part of that ordering is to discern our gifts for ministry in the name of Jesus Christ. To what ministry are you called?

This is the time to repent: to make some changes. Will we allow God to create more order in our chaotic lives? Where and how will we spend our time? How will our financial spending contribute to making this a better world? We are called to change our ways and follow in the footsteps of the one called Jesus, one who was able to defer to another. We are called to live our lives loving one another so that one day we too can hear the voice from heaven saying, "You are my son, the beloved; you are my daughter, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.

³John 1:35-40

⁴Tom Ehrlich, *On a Journey* Wednesday, January 7, 2009, www.onajourney.org